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Business travel

Washington-Reagan National Airport

Time to dismantle the perimeter

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IT IS no mystery why travellers prefer Washington-Reagan National Airport (DCA) to Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD). DCA is smaller, better-organised and far closer to downtown DC. A trip to or from Dulles can take an hour or more in traffic; National is on Washington's Metro, just a few stops from the centre of everything.

Yet, as [we noted in 2012](http://www.economist.com/node/21554235) (<http://www.economist.com/node/21554235>), for years National lagged behind its suburban cousin. This was by design. When Dulles was built in the 1960s, planners introduced a new regulation, called the perimeter rule, designed to force cross-country and international flights to switch to it. The rule prohibits non-stop flights from National to destinations more than a set distance—currently 1,250 miles (2,012km)—from the airport.

In recent years, however, America's [embrace of airline-industry deregulation](http://www.economist.com/blogs/gulliver/2010/12/alfred_kahn_o) (http://www.economist.com/blogs/gulliver/2010/12/alfred_kahn_o) has extended to even this long-sacred tenet of DC airport law. Since 2000, lawmakers have poked a series of holes into the perimeter, allowing carriers to operate a limited number of non-stop cross-country flights from DCA. (Many of the flights just happen to land in cities where powerful senators live.) Today, you



can fly non-stop from DCA to Denver, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, San Francisco or Seattle.

These changes, unsurprisingly, seem to have helped DCA and hurt Dulles, which is set to fly fewer domestic passengers this year than its smaller, more convenient cousin. *Washington Business Journal* [reports](#)

(http://www.bizjournals.com/washington/breaking_ground/2014/06/loudoun-on-edge-as-dulles-domestic-travel-plummets.html) that officials in Loudon County, Virginia, the suburb where Dulles is located, are "on edge". Last week, county officials called Michael Cooper—who works for the Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority (MWAA), which manages both airports—onto the carpet to ask him about Dulles's relative decline.

But the most important news for business travellers didn't come from Mr Cooper's appearance before the local officials. It came from Chris Paolino, an MWAA spokesman, who told *WBJ* last week that the organisation is considering "working with Congress to halt the changes that have partly spurred Reagan's domestic expansion". In other words, strengthening the perimeter rule.

That would be madness. Business and leisure travellers are voting with their feet, and they are choosing DCA. The perimeter rule may have been justified to help IAD get started decades ago. But the larger airport has had more than enough time to establish itself. Far from strengthening rule to serve suburban officials' parochial interests, Congress should embrace a 2009 proposal by John McCain, a Republican senator for Arizona, and scrap it entirely. Absent safety concerns, there is no justification for Congress telling airlines how far they should fly their planes.

(photo: EPA)